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ABSTRACT

The experiment reported measured the degree to which cloze tests deliberately biased on the basis of contrastive analysis would actually be harder for Vietnamese than for speakers of other languages. The experiment tested the approach to ESL (English as a second language) for Vietnamese described in a guide for teachers of Vietnamese refugees published by the Center for Applied Linguistics. The approach maintains that the teacher of Vietnamese students can tell in advance which lessons will be difficult for students by comparing the structure taught with the parallel structure in Vietnamese. Three hypotheses were tested: (1) Vietnamese mean scores on three biased tests were expected to be lower than on the control; (2) the mean score of the Vietnamese on a double-biased test was expected to be lower than on both a selected deletion test and the "salted" test (a test loaded with structures predicted to be hard for Vietnamese); and (3) Vietnamese scores on biased tests adjusted for the covariate control test were expected to be lower in every case than similarly adjusted scores for speakers of other languages. Subjects included 37 Vietnamese, 26 other non-natives, and 9 native speakers of English. Results offer no evidence of a difference in performance due to native language interference for the Vietnamese group. (CLK)

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Can Discourse Be Language-Biased: Vietnamese and Non-Vietnamese Performance on 'Biased' Cloze Tests

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In his landmark formulation of the structuralist contrastive analysis approach, Lado encouraged the application of contrastive analysis to language testing as well as teaching:

> The view of grammar as grammatical structure opens the way to a comparison of the grammatical structure of the foreign language with that of the native language to discover the problems of the student in learning the foreign language. The results of such a comparison tell us what we should test and what we should not test.... (1957, p. 6).

The experiment reported here was intended to measure the degree to which cloze tests that are deliberately biased on the basis of contrastive analysis would actually be harder for Vietnamese than for speakers of other languages. It tests the approach to ESL for Vietnamese described in a guide to teachers of Vietnamese refugees published by the Center for Applied Linguistics:

> The teacher of Vietnamese students can tell in advance which lessons will be difficult for his students by comparing the structure taught in a lesson with the parallel structure in Vietnamese.... (National Indochinese Clearinghouse, 1975, p. 7)

Method

Subjects. Subjects came from eight ESL programs with Vietnamese students.[2] Students were judged to be at the intermediate stage of ESL learning or higher. The 72 subjects from 12 language backgrounds were grouped according to their native languages into three main categories: Vietnamese (37), other non-natives (26), and native speakers of English (9). For the sake of judging degrees of interference, the group designated "other non-natives" was divided further into Southeast Asians, Hmong (5); Laotian (4); and Cambodian (1); Asians, Chinese (5) and Japanese (1); and Indo-Europeans, Spanish (6); Farsi, Hindi, Armenian, and Russian (1 each). In a few cases, respondents indicated two languages as their first. The language used by the minority in the country in question was chosen.[3]

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Tests. Four Reader's Digest articles, each of which had been shortened to about 200 words, served as the passages over which four cloze tests were constructed: (1) A control test was created over one passage by the deletion of every 5th word; (2) a selected deletion test was constructed over a second passage by choosing to place cloze deletions in

structures predicted by a contrastive analysis to be difficult for Vietnamese; (3) a third salted test was constructed by loading the text with structures predicted by contrastive analysis to be hard for Vietnamese and simply deleting every 5th word on an arbitrary basis; (4) the remaining passage was used to construct a double-biased test by both salting and carefully selecting difficult structures for deletion points.

The first and last paragraphs of each passage were left without deletions. Each passage had 35 delections. The time limit on taking the tests was 20 minutes each.

The source of the predictions of difficulty for Vietnamese was a contrastive analysis of English and Vietnamese. Its author shared Lado's approach to learning difficulties:

> The fundamental principal guiding the writing of this contrastive grammatical analysis of English and Vietnamese is the conviction held by many linguists and foreign language teaching specialists that one of the major problems in learning a foreign language is the interference caused by the structural differences between the native language of the learner and the foreign language to be learned (Nguyen Dang Liem, 1967, p.xii).

In the selecting of deletion points and the loading of passages with difficult structures, a representative sample of twelve to fifteen of the structures predicted by the contrastive analysis to be most difficult for Vietnamese was employed. (The tests and a list of these structures are available from the author upon request.)

After the texts were modified, the Flesch (1948) readability formula showed them to be of nearly identical difficulty, and of similar interest levels. However, after the testing reported below was completed, the Fry (1968) readability index was applied in order to determine grade levels. It ranked the control test and the selected deletion test as appropriate for readers between grades six and seven, while the salted test was rated at seventh grade reading level and the double-biased test at between grades seven and eight. In further contrast, a ranking using the SMOG index (McLaughlin 1969) rated the first three tests at eighth grade level and the fourth at ninth grade level.

Results and Discussion

Three hypotheses were tested: (1) the Vietnamese mean scores on the three biased tests were expected to be lower than on the control; (2) the mean score of the Vietnamese on the double-biased test was expected to be lower than that on both the selected deletion test and the salted test; and (3) the Vietnamese scores on biased tests adjusted forthe covariate control test were expected to be lower in every case than similarly adjusted scores for speakers of other languages.

The predicted ranking of tests in the order control, followed by tests with a single bias, and then the double-biased test was observed. On the other hand, this was true for all groups as shown in Table 1, rather than only for the Vietnamese as hypotheses 1 and 2 would predict. This result, however, was contaminated by possible initial differences in difficulty levels across the texts. See Table 1.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations on the Four Cloze Tests for Each Language Group

Language Group	Control		Selected Deletion		Salted		Double-Biased	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Vietnamese	15.89	7.85	11.27	6.61	9.76	7.11	7.41	5.14
Other SE Asian Lgns.	12.20	6.51	7.40	5.30	6.00	2.62	5.80	2.82
Chinese and Japanese	23.33	5.92	15.50	7.82	14.83	7.22	11.33	5.28
Indo-European	20.70	7.04	17.30	7.21	14.80	6.34	11.40	6.80
Native English	26.89	5.37	23.44	4.93	24.00	5.77	21.00	7.57

Furthermore, contrary to the third prediction, the analysis of covariance indicated no significant variation across groups. See Table 2.

Table 2

Analysis of Covariance Contrasting Vietnamese with Other Non-Natives on Each Biased Test, with the Control Test as the Covariate

Test	Vietnamese Mean	Other Non-Natives Mean	df	F*
Selected Deletion	11.99	12.06	1,60	.006
Salted	10.43	10.45	1,60	.001
Double-Biased	7.91	8.51	1,60	.611

*All of the contrasts failed to achieve significance at $p > .05$.

The average of the product-moment correlation between biased scores and the control score was .88 for the Vietnamese and was .85 for the other non-natives taken together. The correlations between item ranks on the several tests also lead us to reject the hypothesis that the Vietnamese performance is unique. The average Spearman rank order correlation for the Vietnamese and the several other language groups taken together was .70 on the selected deletion test; .78 on the salted test; and .67 on the double-biased test. The corresponding Pearson product-moment correlations of the average scores on all four tests was .85 for the Vietnamese with the other Southeast Asians; .83 for the Vietnamese with the Chinese and Japanese Asians; .81 for the Vietnamese with the Indo-Europeans; and .64 for the Vietnamese with the native speakers of English.

In conclusion, there is no evidence of a difference in performance due to native language interference for the Vietnamese group. These findings, though they do not constitute a final answer to the contrastive analysis issue, are nontheless convincing enough to suggest that native language interference may be a less important factor than it has often been claimed to be. The author believes, however, that interference models built on other than structuralist foundations need to be tested. Ross (1976), for example, suggests that contrastive analysis should be directed to the use of structures rather than to their surface forms. The question is whether experimentally testable hypotheses can be formulated.

Notes

[1]This is an expanded version of the conference paper. Those in attendance will notice that the initial indication at the conference, from scanty test results, was that the Vietnamese performance was significantly poorer than that of the other ESL learners.

[2]The experiment would not have been possible without contributions from administrators and students in the following programs:

Stephen Schumacher and Leo J. Brown
Adult Basic Education Program
Evaluation and Development Center
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, Illinois

Six ESL programs with Vietnamese students were located from a list provided by Anne P. Convery of the National Indochinese Clearinghouse, Center for Applied Linguistics:

Michael Jane Buss
International Institute of Boston
Boston, Massachusetts

Cynthia J. Groom
Colorado State Indochinese Refugee Assistance Office
Denver, Colorado

Bienvenido D. Junasa
Office of the Governor
State Commission on Manpower and Full Employment
State Immigrant Service Center
Honolulu, Hawaii

Elizabeth Price
International Institute
St. Louis, Missouri

David I. Quitugua
Diocesan Resettlement Office
Tamuning, Guam

John Westbrook
Brookdale Community College
Learning Center
Long Branch, New Jersey

[3]Tests for over 180 students were received. However, the results of more than half of the respondents were not included in the experiment because the students had failed to complete one or more of the tests.